

# Yeh azaadi jhooti hai\*

The shaping of the opposition in the first year of the Congress raj

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## Abstract

*Within a year of Indian independence, the Communist Party of India declared independence to be a false dawn and the whole Socialist bloc within the ruling Indian National Congress cut its ties with the national government. The speed with which the left disengaged from what had been a patriotic alliance under colonialism surprised many at the time and has perplexed historians ever since. Some have looked to the wider context of the Cold War to explain the onset of dissent within the Indian left. This paper points instead to the neglected domestic context, examining the lines of inclusion and exclusion that were drawn up in the process of the making of the new Indian constitution. Once in power, Congress leaders recalibrated their relationship with their former friends at the radical end of the political spectrum. Despite some of the well-known differences among leading Congress personalities, they spoke as one on industrial labour and the illegitimacy of strikes as a political weapon in the first year of national rule and declared advocates of class politics to be enemies of the Indian state. Congress thus attempted to sideline the Socialists and Communists and brand them as unacceptable in the new regime. This paper focuses on this first year of independence, emphasizing how rapidly the limits of Indian democracy were set in place.*

## Introduction

Just six months after joining in the celebrations at the end of British rule in 1947, the Communist Party of India declared Indian independence to be a hollow falsehood.

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It announced that despite its socialist rhetoric, the Congress-led Indian government was a tool of Anglo–American business interests and Indian capitalism. Such accusations did not go unchallenged. Using the same laws and rationale of the previous colonial regime, government forces were quick to arrest thousands of Communists throughout India.<sup>1</sup> Sedition, it was clear, would not be tolerated in the newly liberated nation. Conventional explanations for the Communists’ change of line have held that it had little to do with what was happening in India. Rather, so the story goes, Indian Communists were merely echoing their masters’ — the Soviet Union’s — position on bourgeois, or in this case, Congress, nationalism, now that the Cold War was under way.<sup>2</sup> Another explanation is that Communists were so buoyed by their success among the peasants of Hyderabad that they believed they could lead an India-wide revolution.<sup>3</sup> The object of this paper is to seek the answer for the Communist *volte-face* in India and, more specifically, in the actions of the Congress government. It argues that in spite of the Congress movement’s tentative anti-colonial alliance with the Communists in provincial politics throughout the interwar period, and despite the strong relationship between Congress Socialists embedded in the Congress party and the prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru,<sup>4</sup> once in power, Congress altered its position. The right wing of the Congress Party, led by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, decried any opposition to the new regime as traitorous. Communists were not the only targets of this reaction: fearing that they might radicalize the Indian working class, Patel’s campaign also branded other groups as *anti-national*. Patel’s strategy was successful not least because in the first year after independence the Congress Socialists<sup>5</sup> had separated themselves from Congress and the Communists had publicly detached themselves from the nationalist movement by declaring, ‘*Yeh azaadi jhooti hai!*’ (This independence is a lie!). Thus, the Congress right had successfully driven away those former allies who were bent on revolutionary economic reform and also demonstrated what was acceptable and unacceptable opposition in the new regime.

Ten days before independence, Govind Ballabh Pant, the premier of the United

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<sup>1</sup>See Sherman, T. (2010). *State Violence and Punishment in India*, Routledge, Abingdon, for the continuities in attitudes towards seditionists in colonial and independent India.

<sup>2</sup>See Windmiller, G. D. and Overstreet, M. (1959). *Communism in India*, University of California Press, Berkeley.

<sup>3</sup>Guha, R. (2007). *India After Gandhi*, Macmillan, London, p. 97.

<sup>4</sup>See Zachariah, B. (2004). *Nehru*, Routledge, Abingdon, pp. 79–86.

<sup>5</sup>Early in 1947 the Congress leadership wanted the Congress Socialist Party to drop ‘Congress’ from its name, thus already claiming ownership of the title and marking out the differences between ‘Congress’ and the left. At their Cawnpore conference, the Congress Socialist Party agreed. Weiner, M. (1957). *Party Politics in India*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, pp. 56–57.

Province and a leading light in the Indian National Congress, declared that anyone who opposed the Congress was a traitor and should have his face blackened.<sup>6</sup> As Congress was the movement that had led India to independence, its opponents were opponents of the new India. Congress leaders varied in the language they used to describe and classify the nation's enemies, but they agreed on who was and who was not a patriot. This common front had already been growing alongside Congress in a number of provinces of British India throughout the decade before independence. So much so, that in 1947, Congress leaders dealt with politicians outside their party with both immense arrogance and the entire state apparatus of law and order, exemplified by their treatment of Jinnah's All India Muslim League. Along with members of the Hindu right-wing organizations and politicians representing Muslims interests, left-wing activists came under special scrutiny by the new regime, be they Communist cadres or the Socialist allies within Congress.

It was easy for Congress leaders to deride communal politicians as the latter were not speaking for the nation as a whole during this crucial period of nation-building. Communal leaders, it was argued, were partisan and only interested in advocating the causes of their own community. They had no interest in making India secular and followed policies antithetical to the Congress agenda. The case of Communists and Socialists was completely different. Here were two sets of politicians who were competing with Congress for the same constituents and through the same means in a future democratic polity. Their treatment at the hands of the ruling elite reveals the limited political space afforded to the opposition in the highly charged atmosphere following independence.

Historians across the political spectrum have followed the same logic as the Indian National Congress and confined the Communists and Socialists to the periphery of this period's history. Most scholars conform to the view that at the time of independence the consolidation of national statehood and power was the need of the hour. So, it is presumed, politicians outside Congress were mistaken either because they did not share the same vision of the new nation as those in the Congress movement or they were advocating their differences in a non-constitutional manner at a time when the responsible, statesmanlike Indians were busy building the foundations of a democratic India. It follows that these political opponents either had the wrong politics or the wrong way of conducting their politics.<sup>7</sup> This, of course,

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<sup>6</sup>He was referring to Hindu Mahasabha agitation in the Princely State of Rajkot. *Times of India*, 5 August 1947.

<sup>7</sup>Chandra, Bipan (ed.). (1983). *The Indian Left*, Vikas Publishing House, Delhi, p. 260. This standard interpretation is evident in most popular histories of the Indian Communists. The same approach is also adopted by Communist writers themselves. For example, see Bardhan, A. B. (2005). 80 CPI, CPI

is not the only way in which the period has been characterized. Some historians simply skip the first year after 1947 in order to move on to the next defining ‘moment’ of India’s political history, commonly termed the ‘Nehruvian’ era. This historiography around democracy,<sup>8</sup> the building of the constitution,<sup>9</sup> passive revolution,<sup>10</sup> and the nature and working of the Indian state,<sup>11</sup> although an important contribution, runs the risk of overlooking how fluid politics were in the birth pangs of the new republic.<sup>12</sup> Rajnarayan Chandavarkar once said of labour historians, ‘We have also remained averse to crossing the sacred divide of 1947.’<sup>13</sup>

This paper investigates the public declarations and private correspondence of political leaders in the crucial period between May 1947, when the interim government of Jawaharlal Nehru was preparing to take over from the Raj, and May 1948, by which time the Communists had set upon a vehemently anti-Congress militancy. It was then, amid the trials of Partition, war against Pakistan, and threat of famine — and despite the misgivings of Jawaharlal Nehru — that the limits of acceptable political behaviour were defined by the Indian state. Advocates of class struggle, be they striking workers or former national heroes such as Sarat Chandra Bose,<sup>14</sup>

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Publication, New Delhi.

<sup>8</sup> See Weiner, *Party Politics in India*; Kothari, R. (1982). *Politics in India*, Sangam, Delhi; Brass, P. R. (1994). *The Politics of India Since Independence*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; Kohli, A. (1991). *Democracy and Discontent: India’s Growing Crisis of Governability*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; Chatterjee, P. (2006). *Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*, Columbia University Press, New York.

<sup>9</sup> See Granville, A. (1999). *The Indian Constitution, Cornerstone of a Nation*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1999; and Khilnani, S. (1999). *The Idea of India*, Penguin, New Delhi, pp. 33–38.

<sup>10</sup> See Kaviraj, S. ‘On State, Society and Discourse in India’, in Manor, J. (1991). *Rethinking Third World Politics*, Longman, London; Chatterjee, P. ‘Development Planning and the Indian State’, in Chatterjee, P. (1998). *State and Politics in India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

<sup>11</sup> See Fuller, C. J. and Benei, V. (2001). *The Everyday State and Society in Modern India*, Hurst and Company, London.

<sup>12</sup> Damodaran, V. (1992). *Broken Promises: Popular Protest, Indian Nationalism and the Congress Party in Bihar 1935–36*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi; Sarkar, S. (1982). ‘Popular Movements, National Leadership and the Coming of Freedom with Partition, 1945–47’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, XVII, 14, 15, 16; Frankel, F. (2005). *India’s Political Economy, 1947–2004*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi; Chatterji, J. (2005). *The Spoils of Partition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; Zachariah, B. (2005). *Developing India: An Intellectual and Social History c.1930–50*, New Delhi; Oxford, Oxford University Press; and Bajpai, R. (2011). *Debating Difference: Group Rights and Liberal Democracy*, New Delhi; Oxford, Oxford University Press.

<sup>13</sup> Chandavarkar, R. (2009). *History, Culture and the Indian City*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 247.

<sup>14</sup> Sarat Chandra Bose was the radical Bengali politician who founded the Revolutionary Socialist Party, briefly lead the Forward Bloc, and was the brother of Subash Chandra Bose.

were dubbed ‘enemies’ of the state and the Congress right came to consolidate a powerful grip over its political opponents. Moreover, as Dipesh Chakrabarty shows, there was an attempt after independence to limit the kind of, at times, spontaneous demonstrations, *satyagrahas*, and strikes that had been the hallmark of Indian popular politics since the end of the First World War.<sup>15</sup> In this febrile atmosphere, the Communist Party, once a former ally of Congress and defender of its imprisoned leaders, found itself excluded from the constituent assembly and, increasingly, from the new languages of citizenship in post-colonial India.

## ‘*Swaraj*’

In the run-up to independence Congress leaders and the left shared a similar vision of *swaraj*. For all parties, nationalism meant the nationalization of key industries, some form of land distribution, and a functioning democracy.<sup>16</sup> It also meant fighting communal violence and a commitment to secularism in its Indian guise. *Swaraj* was a government based on universal suffrage and nationalized industry, free from all connections to the colonial past or to the capitalist future. This vision was ostensibly shared by capitalists and Communists alike. For instance, when Sir Adarshir Dalal gave his first press conference on assuming his position as the member for planning and development in the Indian government, he publicly declared,

It is certainly good to control capitalism and see that it is so managed that it will do good. We do not propose to make any fundamental change in the economic system of the country. There is no doubt that the existing order should be modified in a more socialistic way. When we bring out our booklet you will see that it tends more and more towards socialism.<sup>17</sup>

Sir Dalal was a director in Tata Industries and a signatory to the first part of the Bombay Plan of 1944, a statement on India’s economic future put together by leading industrialists and ‘economic experts’ in the country.<sup>18</sup> This was a significant indication of the diffusion of the rhetoric of planning.

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<sup>15</sup>Chakrabarty, Dipesh (2007). “‘In the Name of Politics’: Democracy and the Power of the Multitude in India”, *Public Culture*, 19:1, pp. 35–57.

<sup>16</sup>Frankel, *India’s Political Economy*, pp. 28–71.

<sup>17</sup>*Times of India*, 15 September 1944.

<sup>18</sup>The other signatories were J. R. D. Tata, Sir Purshotamdas Thakurdas, G. D. Birla, Sir Shr Ram, Kasturbhai Lal Bhai, A. D. Shroff, and John Matthai. Thakurdas, Sir Purshotamdas *et al.* (1944). *A Brief Memorandum Outlining a Plan of Economic Development for India*, New Book Co., Bombay. On the rhetoric of planning, see Chibber, V. (2003). *Locked in Place: State-Building and Late Industrialization in India*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, pp. 85–110.

It would seem that they could agree with the writers on the Communist newspaper, *People's Age*, that the ideal was a workers' and peasants' state, like the Soviet Union where 'in Parliament, in the army, in the economy, in every sphere it [the Russian Revolution] put the common man in power and removed the privileged men from their positions'.<sup>19</sup> By 1947 not only were these sentiments widely held, at least ostensibly, but ministers in local and national government were attempting to transform them into policy.<sup>20</sup> For example, in the first months after independence a number of Congress workers tried to enforce, through an amendment to the Trade Union Act, penalties on unfair employers<sup>21</sup> and fair arbitration between workers and employers. They were also working with *zamindars* to enforce a standardized system of land distribution.<sup>22</sup>

Independence had of course raised expectations, which, it was recognized, national leaders needed to manage.<sup>23</sup> Voices of opposition towards the new regime raged from both left and right but, looking at the public pronouncements of Congress leaders, the most divisive were those dealing with the organized working class. It was the main constituency over which the Congress, Communist Party, and Socialists did battle. If Indians were to adopt democracy and full suffrage, the working population was a large pool of potential voters that every party needed to influence. But workers were not simply a vote bank. Through their unions and in their workplaces they continued to battle against retrenchment, restrictive labour policy, and enforced arbitration throughout the period of independence.<sup>24</sup> The immediate aftermath of the Second World War saw the most intense spell of strike action Indian industry had ever known. Increasing food prices, the scarcity of basic commodities, and a fall in real wages fed stories of corruption, black marketing, and hoarding across the country. Strikes rose from 820 in 1945 (itself a high number compared to previous

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<sup>19</sup> *People's Age*, 2 November 1947.

<sup>20</sup> See Zachariah, *Developing India*, pp. 211–291.

<sup>21</sup> The Trade Union (Amendment) Act, Act no. 45 of 1947, was passed on 20 December 1947. However, according to Vasant Karnick, it had not been used by the time he wrote his book in 1978. Karnick, V. B. (1978). *Indian Trade Unions: A Survey*, Popular Prakasham, Bombay, p. 166.

<sup>22</sup> British Commonwealth Affairs — India — Monthly appreciation by UK High Commissioner, 25 October 1947–7 November 1947, L/WS/1/1597, Oriental and India Office Collections (British Libraries) (hereafter OIOC).

<sup>23</sup> For example, Indian, 'Political Notes by "Candidus"' (pseudonym), *Times of India*, November–January 1947–48 and Rao, L. B. 'A Gloomy View of the Opposition', *Times of India*, 18 January 1948.

<sup>24</sup> Bandhopadhyaya, S. (2006). 'Freedom and its Enemies: Politics of Transition in West Bengal, 1947–1949', *South Asia* (n.s.) XXIX:1, pp. 43–68; Park, R. L. (1949). 'Labor and Politics in India', *Far Eastern Survey*, 18:16, pp. 181–187; Karnick, V. B. (1967). *Strikes in India*, Manaktalas, Bombay; Chibber, *Locked in Place*.

years) to 1,629 and 1,811 in the two years that followed. Union membership also grew in this period. In 1946–47 there was a 50% increase and in 1947–48 membership grew by nearly 100%.<sup>25</sup> To combat this, on 11 March 1947, the interim government led by Nehru promulgated the Industrial Disputes Act.<sup>26</sup> This Act placed wartime machinery for the settlement of industrial disputes in the statute books on a permanent basis. It gave the government of India the power to refer disputes for adjudication to industrial courts. As soon as a referral was made, any continuing strike action was declared illegal and penalties could follow. It is here that the differences of approach between the ruling party and its opposition are most revealing. Politicians across the spectrum vied to portray their own parties as the bastion of patriotism and the working class. The Communists and the right wing of Congress had starkly opposing views on the question of whether strikes were a legitimate expression of dissent during this transitional time, while the Socialists and Congress Gandhians equivocated. However, only Congressmen could wield the power of the state and enforce the laws relating to strike action, binding workers to laws governing strike action. Congressmen could also use their position in government to discredit their opposition. While members of this opposition cannot be described as voiceless victims, throughout the process they were engaged in an unequal battle in which their rhetoric of class struggle was the first casualty when Congress consolidated its hold on the Indian government.

## **An uneasy alliance**

In this mix the case of the Socialist Party is curious. A conglomeration of the Congress Socialist Party and fellow travellers, it was a body inside the Congress Party, allied with Nehru and very much part of the ruling coterie in 1947. Congress included its leaders — Jayaprakash Narayan, Asoka Mehta, Prem Bhasin, Kamala Chattopadhyaya, Acharya Narendra Dev, Aruna Asif Ali, and Minocher Rustom Masani — in various decision-making bodies in and out of the Congress Working Committee. Jayaprakash Narayan was confident that a Congress Socialist would be made general secretary of the Party in 1947 and in September of that year Masani entered the government with the portfolio of publicity officer for refugee news.<sup>27</sup>

However, not all Congress members were pleased with this cosy relationship between Socialists and the ruling party. Patel in particular was distrustful of the So-

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<sup>25</sup>Karnick, *Indian Trade Unions*, p. 161.

<sup>26</sup>Act no. 14 of 1947.

<sup>27</sup>*Times of India*, 15 September 1947.

cialists, seeing them as fair-weather, self-serving, and especially dangerous because their left-wing rhetoric potentially alienated moderate sympathizers of Congress. As early as April 1947, Patel was expressing concerns about the Socialists.<sup>28</sup> For him Congress had no space anyway for members of different political groups and divided loyalties — it should comprise one party accepting party unity. He publicly rebuked and slandered them, despite their official position in government, and was critical of their stance on labour issues. One of Patel's repeated refrains was that they lacked a cohesive and united policy. For example, one reporter of the *Hindustan Times* celebrated the ridiculing of the Socialists by Patel thus:

The Socialists got it in the neck but the Sardar did not use the axe. He used a much sharper weapon — sarcasm — for which his utterances are famed. About decontrol, for instance, the Socialists do not let one side of their mouth know that what the other says meaning that Ram Manohar Lohia advocated the policy while Asoka Mehta made it the basis of the token strike.<sup>29</sup>

Despite their lack of consistency, as emphasized by Patel, the Socialists spoke in unison, from the podium to the cabinet, about the need to develop the country's economy on socialist lines. Asoka Mehta, the Bombay trade union leader, publicly declared that Congress must be a workers' party.<sup>30</sup> This blunt statement roundly contradicted the advice of advocates of capitalism who were trying to influence the economic direction of India. One such proponent was the ambassador of the United States, Sir Henry W. Grady, who gave a lecture on how capitalism was the best form of rule to the Rotary Club of Bombay 15 days after independence.<sup>31</sup> Many Congress politicians shared Mehta's views. For example, openly opposing the opinion of industrialist entrepreneurs such as Gyansham Das Birla and Jehangir Ratanji Dadabhoy Tata, Subash Chandra Bannerjee, thrice president of the All India Trade Union Congress and now the labour, commerce, and industry minister of West Bengal, declared that the next challenge of independence was to fight capitalism.<sup>32</sup> In

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<sup>28</sup>*Bombay Chronicle*, 4 April 1947.

<sup>29</sup>*Hindustan Times*, 26 January 1947. Decontrol here referred to the continued use of wartime policies, food rationing, and price control. It was an issue that divided Congress as Gandhi wanted controls to be lifted no matter what the consequences. For him controls signified the continuance of colonial bondage. Others, more concerned about the lack of enough food leading to potential famine, felt some form of control was necessary. See Duncan, I. (1995). 'The Politics of Liberalisation in Early Post-Independence India: Food Deregulation in 1947', *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, 33:1, pp. 25–45.

<sup>30</sup>*Times of India*, 6 November 1947.

<sup>31</sup>*Times of India*, 27 August 1947.

<sup>32</sup>At the first meeting of the West Bengal Indian National Trade Union Congress (henceforth



October of the same year the stalwart Gandhian Socialist, Acharya Kripalani, general secretary of Congress for 12 years and president of the Party from November 1946 to November 1947,<sup>33</sup> declared that Bombay could set the example of socialism for the rest of the country to follow.<sup>34</sup> Many Congress firebrands who were not card-holding Socialists followed Nehru's lead and advocated staunchly socialist policies. For example, the Bombay premier, Balasaheb Gangadhar Kher, told industrialists that in this new era of industrial democracy they should treat their workers as partners and not menials.<sup>35</sup> The fact that the premier of the city that was the home of the Indian Stock Exchange and a centre of Indian capital was speaking a language similar to socialism suggests that the Socialists had much to feel confident about in this period.

## Communist critics

The second group of politicians with whom Congress shared the same language of *swaraj* but who also competed for the same constituency was the Communist Party of India. Relations between the two sets of activists had been through peaks and troughs since the Party officially formed in the 1920s partly because, although both sets of politicians were united in their goal of independence, their political methods and their supporters prevented them from agreeing a common strategy. Entrenched political relationships between Congress members and Communists also created different political equations, from province to province. For example, Congress members relied heavily on Communists in provinces such as Punjab where Congress was weak, while conversely they competed vociferously against Communists in provinces such as Bombay and the United Province where Congress was strong.

In terms of direct action against the Communist Party, in 1945 a subcommittee comprising the Congress leaders Pant, Patel, and Nehru began investigating the Communist Party. They formally charged the accused members of the Party of 'acting in opposition to Congress policy', citing Communist participation in the British war effort in 1942. In December of the same year they pushed through a resolution in the Congress Working Committee to oust all Communist cadres from the Congress Party.<sup>36</sup> This may have been a logical consequence of the national

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INTUC) meeting, Calcutta. *Times of India*, 16 September 1947.

<sup>33</sup>Weiner, *Party Politics in India*, p. 68.

<sup>34</sup>*Times of India*, 9 October 1947.

<sup>35</sup>*Times of India*, 21 November 1947.

<sup>36</sup>Mitra, N. N. (1946). *Indian Annual Register, 1945, Volume I, January–June*, Annual Register Office, Calcutta, pp. 112–122.

movement becoming a political party in a new era of party political politics, but in practice this act excluded a number of renowned and respected left-wing activists from positions of power in the national movement and publicly cast their patriotism into doubt.

Despite their shared language, *swaraj* meant something altogether different for Congressies and Communists. The Communists presented an alternative *swaraj* to large swathes of the Indian population who they mobilized to oppose the ruling elite, be it colonial or Congress. Congress leaders were alive to the threat that Communists posed to their new power. In particular, Communists caused trouble in the south of India and also in Hyderabad, a princely state with a Muslim Nizam in the centre of Indian territory, where they had linked up with peasant rebellions in 1946. Hyderabad was particularly troubling for the Indian government as Communists were effectively mobilizing peasants against the Nizam. All in all, the struggle lasted four years from 1946 and involved 3,000 villages across 316,000 square miles.<sup>37</sup> Hundreds of Communists were detained and this trend continued long before Indian independence. For example, by early 1947 the Madras government had already arrested 148 Communists under the Madras Maintenance of Public Order Ordinance.<sup>38</sup> A year later, a *Times of India* 'special correspondent' travelled to the state and with the help of local *zamindars* attempted to garner the truth. He reported that Communists were 'terrorizing' the fearful and simple peasants of the state:<sup>39</sup>

We found concrete evidence of Communist terrorism in the shape of burnt down and demolished houses. The Communists symbols [sic.] of sickle and hammer were painted in red on the walls of the houses of the village officials. We obtained irrefutable evidence from villagers of Communist atrocities.<sup>40</sup>

In such a context the public utterances of government ministers on Communists took on the same tone as the erstwhile colonial rulers. Ministers labelled Communists as outsiders, bent on infiltration, *anti-national*, and out to cause destruction. Congress speeches reminded audiences of the Communist betrayal in 1942 when they had supported British war efforts rather than participate in the nationalist *Quit India* movement. They stressed Communist dependence on the Soviet Union

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<sup>37</sup> Sarkar, S. (1989). *Modern India*, Macmillan Press, London, p. 442.

<sup>38</sup> The Communist Party of India, L/WS/1/749, OIOC.

<sup>39</sup> Sunday News Correspondent, '“Red” Terrorism in Hyderabad', *Times of India*, 25 January 1948.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* The fact that the results of the first general election in India showed the highest polling member of parliament to be a Communist returned from the Telangana constituency suggests that the fear of Communists was not as universally felt as the special correspondent chose to report.

and linked them to a foreign and *anti-national* doctrine.<sup>41</sup> The Communists were not only unpatriotic, but they also possessed peculiar mindsets, that is to say, they were said to be autocratic and religious in their faith in Marxist orthodoxy.<sup>42</sup> These characterizations abounded long before the Communists had taken up the extreme left line.

The Communists responded through their press and public presence and presented a constant and credible critique of the Indian state. They were not simply critical: Communist writers openly celebrated independence but also urged caution. The 15 August issue of *People's Age* is replete with the warnings:

But the battle which the martyrs began had not ended: the enemy has been compelled to retreat but aims desperately to maintain his control, militarily and economically, over our Motherland. And while we are busy preparing to celebrate the Great Day in whatever way we can, the imperialists are feverishly going ahead with their own plans to place their men in key positions all over the country.<sup>43</sup>

Instead of falling in line and waiting patiently for the government to reveal its long-term economic agenda, the Communists accused Nehru and his cohort of betraying the promises they had made in the run-up to independence. They focused on the fact that, far from severing ties with their colonial past, members of the Constituent Assembly of India were drawing up a constitution that took large chunks of legislation from the 1935 Government of India Act. Moreover, the Constituent Assembly had sent Sir B. N. Rau, the constitutional adviser, to the United States and Ireland to garner advice on constitution building.<sup>44</sup> Even Puran Chand Joshi, the general secretary of the Party and friend of Nehru, writing in the *People's Age*, expressed his indignation with the Congress leaders because they had too readily adopted the draconian public order measures of the British Indian government in their new model constitution. While Joshi was glad that it enshrined universal adult suffrage,

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<sup>41</sup>In the main, they all echoed Jayaprakash Narayan's words: 'The Communists were only Russian patriots who were unreliable, undependable and who betrayed and stabbed the country in the back in her hour of need. The Communists do not work in the interests of the country but according to the dictates and commands of the Russian government. As a nationalist I believe it will be in the best interest of India to maintain friendly relations with Russia but you should not permit agents of a foreign power to work, grow and prosper in our country.' Speech made at Bangalore, 9 March 1947, Communist Survey, 15 December–15 May 1947, Communist Activity in India, 1946–48, L/PJ/12/432, OIOC.

<sup>42</sup>Kapadia, G. R. 'The Baffling Russian Mind', *Times of India*, 9 November 1947.

<sup>43</sup>*People's Age*, 15 August 1947.

<sup>44</sup>*Times of India*, 17 October 1947.

[it] also reproduces several reactionary and autocratic features of British rule in India. The same second chamber to delay rapid democratic progress, the same special powers that were so liberally used by British Governors ... to crush every popular rising for freedom and a better life.<sup>45</sup>

Most significantly, while the rest of the media had imposed a form of self-censorship when the government was dealing with communal riots and the fall-out of Partition, the Communist *People's Age* exposed details of each massacre and the government's inability to deal with it all.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, the high commissioner for the United Kingdom reported back that the government of Bombay had prohibited the *People's Age* from publishing anything to do with 'the communal situation or on questions concerning relations between India and Pakistan' for one month in December 1947. He went on to state that, 'This paper has been practically the only one in India during recent months to expose details of (a) the killings in the Punjab Sikh states, the East Punjab and Delhi and (b) the activities of the extreme Hindu organizations in the disturbed areas.'<sup>47</sup>

Communists expressed disillusionment with the Congress leaders of India within weeks of independence. They focused their spotlight on Jawaharlal Nehru to show the country his ineptitude at confronting communalism. For example, in a speech in September 1947, Balchandra Trimbuk Ranadive said,

Jawaharlal is afraid of taking the name of Muslims today. His speech did not appeal to the humanism inside the people. He did not rouse the nationalism of the people. He did not call upon the people to rise in defence of freedom and stop riots. For that needed a sense of realism, a sense of responsibility that is lacking today.<sup>48</sup>

Ranadive argued that these riots and communal massacres not only damaged community relations in affected areas, they also brought the Indian nation into disrepute on the world stage. For example, they characterised Congress actions as so weak that they were bringing shame on the representatives of the new country in the United Nations. He extolled:

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<sup>45</sup>*People's Age*, 31 August 1947.

<sup>46</sup>British Commonwealth Affairs — India — Monthly appreciation by UK High Commissioner, 6–19 December 1947, L/WS/1/1597, OIOC.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup>Ranadive was known as 'BTR'. 'BTR on the riot situation and our tasks'. Speech delivered in the GB meeting held in RF Hall on 18 September 1947, Communist Party of India 1947/18(A), P. C. Joshi Archives.

With what face can Vijaya Lakshmi fight for the democratic rights of Indian peoples in South Africa? Smuts will fling on her face the challenge that after all I have only segregated the Indians and not massacred and transferred as is being done by your government. Thus these riots have deprived our representatives at the United Nations of moral strength to stand and fight for democracy.<sup>49</sup>

For Ranadive, only Communists could be trusted to defend Indian independence and democracy. The actual content of this democracy was unclear but he was adamant that it meant a defeat of the Hindu right-wing agenda. To achieve this end he encouraged his comrades to join the National Home Guard:

We have to enrol ourselves in Home Guards. How can an organised party like ours keep aloof of Home Guards and allow that to be filled by RSS who are out to instigate riots? Today it is not enough to speak of democracy. We must be able to defend it physically.<sup>50</sup>

These public pronouncements suggest that Communists were posing as more nationalist, more democratic, and more resolute than their Indian Congress counterparts. However much they celebrated the virtues of the Soviet Union,<sup>51</sup> the Communist press was dominated in the main by reportage of the various local struggles across the sub-continent at this time, struggles in which Communists were deeply involved. This was particularly true of the Telangana struggle but they also wrote about events in Tebhaga, Manipur, Kashmir, Bombay, West Bengal, Delhi, and East Punjab which were bringing out hundreds of thousands of industrial workers, office employees, peasants, students, and refugees. At a time of instability, the Communists were increasingly critical of the government's actions and, as a stronger party than the Socialists, were able to do so with more impact.

## Divide and rule

The question of labour (that is, the role of unions and the right to strike) constituted the largest threat posed by Communists and Socialists to the government. And it was on the labour question that the government proved to be especially brutal in its response.

In 1947 the All India Trades Union Congress (AITUC) was the largest federation of organized labour in the country. Despite being led by the respected Liberal trade

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<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup>*People's Age*, 2 November 1947.

unionist, N. M. Joshi, since 1940,<sup>52</sup> it was, for all intents and purposes, dominated by Communists. They had achieved this through their ability to work for labour interests in the industrial centres of India, while Congress nationalist and Socialist union activists had been jailed for taking part in the 1942 *Quit India* movement. Conversely, this was the moment that the British had legalized the Communist Party of India because of its support for the war against Hitler and the Axis powers. However, they were not the only 'collaborationist' union federation. The Indian Federation of Indian Labour, established by the former Communist, Manbendra Nath Roy, also had a free, if weaker, hand to organize unions in this period. By contrast, the Hind Mazdoor Sevak Sangh set up in 1938 by Gandhi's followers in Congress, proved moribund while its leaders were in jail. The dominance of AITUC in the industrial trade unions was thus clear. So much so, that in 1946, S. C. Joshi, the chief labour commissioner of India, inspected the AITUC and declared it to be a representative federation of Indian labour,<sup>53</sup> and in November of the same year the leadership of the Hind Mazdoor Sevak Sangh passed a resolution to urge its members to join AITUC. This position gave the Communist leadership the power to claim to represent the labouring poor. They were able to use district and factory committees to build up a support base for their ideas and recruit more cadres to the Communist Party. In these ways Communist unions became a serious headache for Congress leaders who were friends of industry, commerce, and the landed peasantry in India.

In May 1947, Sardar Patel began to make his moves against AITUC. His task was made easy because industrial relations were being widely reported in the Indian press on a daily basis. One example of such reportage was the Bombay Industrial Conditions Enquiry Committee's interim report on the cotton textile industry in Khandesh. This enquiry was part of an ongoing investigation on working and living conditions in various industrial sectors and was particularly important because of Bombay's position as the industrial nerve centre of the country. The Committee members, two Indian Civil Service officers, and the assistant commissioner of Labour, Ahmedabad, found that strikes had increased but they did not blame the textile workers for this 'regrettable' fact. Violence and indiscipline had grown among workers because factory owners treated them badly and Communists exploited this fact. In fact 'Communist propaganda and incitement are probably the most powerful of all causes of the recent disturbances to industry.'<sup>54</sup> To check this development, Congress leaders were advised that they needed to loosen the Communists' grip over

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<sup>52</sup>Karnick, V. B. (1972). *N. M. Joshi: Servant of India*, United Asia Publishers, Bombay, p. 257.

<sup>53</sup>Joshi, S. C. (1947). *Report Regarding the Representative Character of the All-India Trade Union Congress and the Indian Federation of Labour in 1946*, Government of India Press, New Delhi.

<sup>54</sup>*Times of India*, 17 May 1947.

workers as well as strive for better labour conditions and standards of living. For the Committee, 'Khandesh is a warning of the danger threatening the whole fabric of society through Communist exploitation of unredeemed grievances of working class illiteracy. The menace cannot be ignored.'<sup>55</sup>

These warnings were not lost on Sardar Patel, the man in the interim government on whom industrialists and the Hindu right could rely. He was also in a position to act as he was head of the Home Department from 1946. Patel was known for consolidating the princely states into the Indian union. However, he was also anxious to neutralize the Communist influence over unions, not simply to consolidate Congress power, but to prevent Communists from strengthening their own support bases in India and abroad through their union positions. As he explained in a letter to a regional minister,

At present, the Communist Party gets all the privileges and advantages from Government because of their being in charge of the Trade Union Congress. Their membership is largely bogus and their control over labour is restricted to their ability to create mischief. If the Government were to withdraw the recognition which gives them the advantages, they would lose their influence considerably.<sup>56</sup>

His solution to this problem was not simply to call Communists names and refer to their 'traitorous' past. Instead, it was to drive a wedge between them and their membership by creating an alternative trade union organization — the Indian National Trades Union Congress (INTUC). In May 1947, he attempted this by organizing a conference of the Hind Mazdoor Sevak Sang, of which he was president, with Gulzarilal Nanda, at which labour leaders declared their allegiance to INTUC. This would, Patel presumed, attract the support of non-Communist union leaders and politicians:

It was with the object of counteracting their influence that we organised a separate movement known as the Indian National Trade Union Congress a month ago ... Our idea was and still is to recognise the INTUC if it is properly organised; and if all the non-Communist forces were combined, the INTUC would be much more powerful and strong than the All India Trade Union Congress. It would then be easy for Government to give recognition to the new organisation.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup>Sardar Vallabhai Patel to Dr Sampurnanand, Minister of Education and Finance, United Provinces, 18 June 1947. Das, D. (1973). *Sardar Patel's Correspondence, Volume 10, 1945–50*, Navajivan House, Ahmedabad, p. 332.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*

The success of this venture depended on the participation of Socialists and other left wing party activists leaving AITUC. When the idea was mooted, some Socialists responded positively. For example, the United Province union leader, Hariharnath Shastri, a member of the National Executive of the Socialist Party, resigned from the Party because he felt that the country needed unity between labour and Congress.<sup>58</sup> On the other hand, others such as Jayaprakash Narayan, deliberated and then refused,<sup>59</sup> while Asoka Mehta vehemently disagreed that a new organization needed to be set up. He felt that AITUC, despite its Communist leanings, had the confidence of organized workers. For him, increased government legislation, checks, and regular elections would force AITUC to become more representative of labour across the board. Mehta felt that the creation of INTUC was dangerous for workers as it would force arbitration in industrial disputes. While this was not a problem in itself, because of the strong link between Congress and INTUC, the arbitration would not always be in the workers' interests.<sup>60</sup> In this way Patel's plans to work with the Socialists failed as they not only participated in strike action organized by unions that were not affiliated to INTUC<sup>61</sup> but also formed yet another national union federation, the Hind Mazdoor *Panchayat*, in 1948.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, it could be argued that AITUC membership only weakened when its members felt alienated by the Communist left turn after February 1948. This is reflected in the fact that although Patel's INTUC was formally created in May 1947, the Congress Working Committee had to issue a resolution five months later in September 1947 to encourage Congress members to 'get those unions which they are organizing and of which they are members, affiliated to the newly formed INTUC'.<sup>63</sup> By March 1949 INTUC membership had grown to 986,983 compared to AITUC's 679,143 and the government nominated INTUC members to represent Indian labour at International Labour Organization meetings.<sup>64</sup> Thus, the larger goal of attenuating AITUC's grip on labour was achieved, especially when the Socialists decided to form yet another alternative central union, the Hind Mazdoor Sabha, in December 1948. This is reflected in N. M. Joshi's plea to the Socialists when they quit the AITUC earlier in the same year:

<sup>58</sup>Weiner, *Party Politics in India*, p. 61.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.* p. 50.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup>Zaidi, A. M. (1988). *INC the Glorious Years, Volume 4; 1939–1950, Texts of the Resolutions Passed by the INC, the AICC and the CWC*, Indian Institute of Applied Political Research, New Delhi, p. 356.

<sup>62</sup>Memorandum on the activities of the All India Socialist Party between July 1947 to April 1948, Intelligence Bureau, Ministry of Home Affairs, India, 25 June 1948, M/O States Political 373-P/48, National Archives of India (hereafter NAI).

<sup>63</sup>Zaidi, *INC the Glorious Years*, p. 320.

<sup>64</sup>Park, 'Labor and Politics in India', p. 186.



I make a special appeal to the Socialist leaders in the trade union movement. The declared objective of the AITUC is the establishment of socialism, i.e., the same as that of the Socialist Party ... I appeal to them not to lightly cast away the unity of our class action.<sup>65</sup>

Joshi's appeal was in vain and, isolated amid an increasingly hostile Communist cohort, he resigned from AITUC in February 1948.<sup>66</sup>

To control workers was not an end in itself. Congress leaders were reminded of the importance of labour from a range of different economic interests in 1947. Labour was vital to the development of the country, and a volatile labour force could disrupt any planning measures that leaders such as Nehru were making, whether they were in or out of unions. The main weapon of labourers was to strike. And in the months either side of independence, workers from the North Western railway through to clerks in Calcutta and mill hands in Bombay continued to use their ability to strike, although much of this went unreported as newspaper editors practised self-censorship. Between 1947 and 1949, India saw 3,990 strikes up and down the country.<sup>67</sup> The reason for these actions ranged from locale to locale: the rights of *dalits* to enter temples in Kerala, layoffs among the workforce in Bombay, traditional entitlements for farm workers in Bengal. In other words, striking continued at the same levels as had been experienced during the last years of British rule. Many denounced these outbreaks and now had the added advantage of using nationalist rhetoric to condemn worker initiatives. For example, the industrialist J. R. D. Tata demanded that the government deal with strikes with a firm hand in order to ensure increased production.<sup>68</sup> Even more telling, members of Congress who had not uniformly condemned strikes before independence now quickly turned on strikers as acting illegitimately in the new regime.

However divided Congress members may have been on a number of issues, during this period they spoke as one on the issue of strikes. The government could not deal effectively with striking workers while Delhi, the Indian capital, was overwhelmed with refugees and communal genocide. Indeed, in this situation it was Nehru and not Patel who condemned strikers as selfish traitors.<sup>69</sup> For him, they were

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<sup>65</sup>Dufty, N. F. (1964). *Industrial Relations in India*, Allied Publishers, Bombay, p. 121.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup>Rao, P. L. and Raju, P. R. K. (2010). *Industrial Relations in India: Beginning of Working Class to Date, 1850 to 2009*, Excel Books, New Delhi, p. 121.

<sup>68</sup>*Times of India*, 27 August 1947.

<sup>69</sup>Speech by Jawaharlal Nehru on 30 September 1947. Gopal, S. (1986). *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru, Second Series, Volume Four*, Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, Teen Murti House, New Delhi, p. 108.

bringing shame on the nation as no work meant poverty and a bad name abroad.<sup>70</sup> The Socialist, Jayaprakash Narayan, urged textile workers to return to work and in doing so end the cloth famine 'afflicting the nation'.<sup>71</sup> The labour minister, Nanda, insisted that the big textile strike in Bombay was illegal, and Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar's union, the Rashtriya Mazdoor Sangh, urged workers to stop the strike.<sup>72</sup>

These speeches had no effect. In October, more textile workers went out on strike in Ahmedabad while women joined the mill workers out in Bombay, culminating in a lightning strike which brought out 4,500 strikers at the end of the month. Under the Industrial Disputes Act, all of these strikes were illegal. On 7 November — the day Indian troops fought to defeat Pakistani raiders in Kashmir — Nanda issued a broadcast on All India Radio.

The leaders of a trade union who takes the workers out on strike is an enemy of the country. The workers who go out on strike are their own worst enemies. They incur immediate loss for themselves. Much worse than that, they are pulling down the economic structure of the country.<sup>73</sup>

Nanda's point was to urge workers to see themselves as soldiers, carrying out their duty, sacrificing their own interests for that of the nation. One response to this plea was immediate: over 8,000 Bombay dockworkers came out on strike.<sup>74</sup>

Over the next two months the government brought industrialists and labour leaders together in a quest to remedy the situation and confer and arbitrate over the strikes. Some deals were struck, and Nehru was able to report to his state premiers that all had agreed on a three-year truce in industrial relations. This meant that union leaders had agreed to no strikes and factory owners had agreed to no lockouts for three years, while all concerned were to work on establishing effective mechanisms to settle industrial disputes.<sup>75</sup> However, peace did not even last three weeks. On 29 December 1947, the Socialist Party of Bombay, joining local Communists, staged a strike in protest against the new strike adjudication machinery.<sup>76</sup> To prevent the strike from taking place, the Congress-led state government banned all political

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<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup>*Times of India*, 29 September 1947.

<sup>72</sup>*Times of India*, 24 September 1947.

<sup>73</sup>*Times of India*, 7 November 1947.

<sup>74</sup>*Times of India*, 14 November 1947.

<sup>75</sup>Jawaharlal Nehru to Premiers, 19 December 1947. Gopal, *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, p. 463.

<sup>76</sup>Indian High Commissioner's summary and appreciation of position from 27 December 1947 to 2 January 1948 to Commonwealth Relations Office, DO 35/3159, The National Archives (TNA).

conferences due to take place in Bombay during the same period. In response 3,000 students took to the streets and clashed with police. Inevitably the *People's Age* roundly condemned the Bombay government for its handling of the situation. The Communist newspaper declared,

The workers of Bombay, including the suburbs have pronounced their judgement on the most anti-democratic labour policy, the policy of decontrol and the most shameless suppression of civil liberties, pursued by the Congress ministry of Bombay. The workers have declared that these policies must go, that the Police Raj sought to be clamped on the people of Bombay by the Home Minister, Morarji Desai, must end.<sup>77</sup>

The government reaction to these events was mixed. Nehru was sickened by the 'betrayal' of the Socialists but also mindful of the fact that 'Government also have to carry people with them and any government which has to indulge in repeated conflicts with the people has somehow lost touch with their prevailing sentiment.'<sup>78</sup> He knew he could only deal with Communists if they broke the law because they were not in Congress. He was most angered by the student action, claiming that, 'Students in India have lost any sense of discipline and it is not easy to deal with them by methods of force and compulsion though these may have to be resorted to sometimes.'<sup>79</sup> Morarji Desai echoed this sentiment in speeches made in Bombay at the same time.<sup>80</sup> In a letter to Gulzarilal Nanda, the Labour minister, Nehru's anxieties were clear:

I have been myself greatly distressed by the strikes that are going on. I have no doubt that the token strike was wrong and that the present strike of the Port Trust Employees is also wrong. What worries me however is the fact that we have got so cut off from large sections of the public that we cannot influence them sufficiently. Right or wrong, the fact that our lead is not followed is itself a matter of significance. The Congress prestige has diminished tremendously although individual Congressmen are still respected.<sup>81</sup>

Although here Nehru was showing sensitivity to the image and status of Congress, he had nothing to say about the reasons why the workers were striking. They were simply wrong.

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<sup>77</sup>*People's Age*, 4 January 1948.

<sup>78</sup>Jawaharlal Nehru to B. G. Kher, Premier of Bombay, 5 January 1948. Gopal, S. (1987). *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru, Second Series, Volume Five*, Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, Teen Murti House, New Delhi, p. 4.

<sup>79</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup>*Times of India*, 6 January 1948.

<sup>81</sup>Jawaharlal Nehru to Gulzarilal Nanda, Labour Minister, Bombay, 22 January 1948. Gopal, *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, pp. 356–357.

Patel's response was predictably far more aggressive. In the new year, Patel addressed a crowd of 800,000 in Calcutta. He was jubilant after the left had failed to rally people against a security bill which would authorize the imprisonment of citizens for up to six months without trial, a bill the speakers on the left proclaimed was antithetical to the nationalists of old. He told the audience that the government was theirs now; they had no reason to strike.<sup>82</sup> In Lucknow, he continued in the same strain, explaining to labour leaders that the situation was now different and strikes were a weapon of the past:

I appeal to labour leaders not to foment strikes and create disturbances. There is no alien power. It is easy to approach us now. Why should labour leaders not come straight to us and tell about the grievances of labour? The Trades Union Congress is working under the influence of Communists. The days of strikes and hartal are gone. They were needed when we were fighting against a foreign power. Those factions must cease now.<sup>83</sup>

He called strike leaders 'terrorists'<sup>84</sup> and warned strikers they were ruining India.<sup>85</sup> Striking workers also attacked Patel. At a rally in Bombay, striking Bombay Port Authority workers heckled him and tried to break up the meeting when he railed against strikes. Instead of listening to their demands, he insisted that politicians known for their 'disregard of India' were inciting the workers. Paraphrasing his speech a reporter put it thus: 'The Communists, who helped the British government during the war years while Congress leaders were in jail, were engineering labour unrest now when the Congress was running the government of the country.'<sup>86</sup>

## The Socialists depart

On 30 January 1948, Mahatma Gandhi was shot dead at a prayer meeting in Delhi. It had an immediate effect on the nation and seems to have brought an end to the communal rioting that had endured for over a year. Recent research has illustrated the extent to which Congress used Gandhi's death and memorialization to consolidate its own power.<sup>87</sup> Gandhi's death certainly affected the fate of the

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<sup>82</sup> *Times of India*, 6 January 1948.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Times of India*, 18 January 1948.

<sup>85</sup> *Times of India*, 6 January 1948.

<sup>86</sup> *Times of India*, 21 January 1948.

<sup>87</sup> Khan, Y. (2011). 'Performing Peace: Gandhi's Assassination as a Critical Moment in the Consolidation of the Nehruvian State', *Modern Asian Studies*, 45:1, pp. 57–80.

opposition in India — and did not stop at the right wing organization from which his assassin came. Jayaprakash Narayan quickly came out to condemn the inability of the police and hence Patel's Home Ministry, to protect Gandhi during his public vigils. He suggested that the police were, in a sense, responsible for the Mahatma's death. This was the last straw for Patel. His reaction to that particular insinuation was iterated in a speech to the Congress Legislature Party just days after the assassination:

(T)he Socialist Party were offered seats on the Congress Working Committee. They refused. They were then offered seats in the Central Government. They refused. I then made an offer to hand over one province to them to carry on their experiments without let or hindrance. They refused. And today they exploited the greatest misfortune and calamity of the nation for party end.<sup>88</sup>

The simmering hostility, which long predated Gandhi's death, had blown up into open enmity. In December 1947 Ram Monohar Lohia, the Socialist Party leader demanded Indian general elections be held in 1948.<sup>89</sup> He was convinced that the Socialists would win, or at least win enough seats to direct the future direction of the Indian government. His confidence was also boosted by their 'considerable' success when contesting the Bombay Municipal Corporation elections in early January in which they won 26 seats at the expense of mainly Congress rivals.<sup>90</sup> Furious that the Socialists had dared to stand against Congress in an election, the Bombay Socialists were ousted from the Party: following Jayaprakash's missive against his Home ministry, Patel pushed the All India Congress Committee to bar from Congress any member who was affiliated to another political party.<sup>91</sup> This *de facto* knocked out the Socialists. Thus on 22 March 1948 the Indian Socialist Party officially withdrew their allegiance to the Indian National Congress at their annual convention. Socialist Party leaders sought to form an independent opposition to the ruling party, which, they claimed, was busy placating 'capitalists', while Communists were pursuing their own, unpatriotic ends. Since independence, debates had been raging inside the Socialist Party about its role within Congress.<sup>92</sup> This announcement made

<sup>88</sup>Sardar Patel's Rejoinder on Security Measures for Gandhiji's Protection, 4 February 1948. Chopra, P. N. (1998). *The Collected Works of Sardar Vallabhai Patel, Volume XIII (1 January 1948–31 December 1948)*, Konark Publishers, Delhi, p.88.

<sup>89</sup>6–19 December 1947, L/WS/1/1597, OIOC.

<sup>90</sup>Memorandum on the activities of the All India Socialist Party between July 1947 to April 1948, Intelligence Bureau, Ministry of Home Affairs, India, 25 June 1948, M/O States Political 373-P/48, NAI; Election results in 20–27 February 1948, L/WS/1/1597, OIOC.

<sup>91</sup>Weiner, *Party Politics in India*, p. 57.

<sup>92</sup>Memorandum on the activities of the All India Socialist Party between July 1947 to April 1948, Intelligence Bureau, Ministry of Home Affairs, India, 25 June 1948, M/O States Political 373-P/48, NAI.

clear that those within the Party who were confident of electoral success when free of the Congress brand, had won the argument a good six months after independence. The passage of the Socialist Party out of Congress had been made easier by Patel's push, much to the dismay of Socialists like Jayaprakash who had hoped to influence Congress by staying and fighting from inside it. Nehru, the Socialist Party's consistent ally, expressed his own despair:

The resignation of members of the Socialist Party from the Congress is a major event in our domestic politics. However most of us might view this, there is a general regret that many old Congress men should have found it necessary to leave the old moorings. From every other point of view it is desirable that nothing could be said or done to add to the rift that has been created. The times are too critical for us to add to our differences and our difficulties.<sup>93</sup>

To Nehru and Patel alike, the Socialists had abandoned ship. The history of the Socialist Party after its departure is as varied as the disparate leaders in the movement; each embarked on different paths to oppose Congress. My purpose here is not to follow them and evaluate their 'success' or 'failure' as opponents of the regime. More important is the fact that they, despite having fought for independence alongside Congress, were now political opponents as their, relatively moderate, brand of class politics did not fit with Congress policy.

## ***'Yeh azaadi jhooti hai!'***

On 27 September 1947 at the inaugural meeting of the *Cominform*<sup>94</sup>, or alliance of world Communism, Andrei Zhdanov, a prominent Soviet theoretician, proposed a change in Communist political strategy to be applied in the foreign policy of the Soviet Union and the domestic policies of all abiding national Communist parties across the globe. The time had come to refrain from allying with bourgeois nationalist movements and to adopt a more confrontational political line. His was a call to arms against 'class enemies': bureaucrats, landlords, big business proprietors, and those he called the 'toadies' of Anglo-American imperialism.<sup>95</sup> It took the Communist Party of India six months to adopt this approach at its annual conference in

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<sup>93</sup>Jawaharlal Nehru to Premiers, 1 April 1948. Gopal, *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, pp. 338–339.

<sup>94</sup>Cominform — The Information Bureau of the Communist and Workers' Parties, commonly known as Cominform a coordination body of Marxist-Leninist communist parties in Europe during the early Cold War, formed in part as a replacement of the Communist International. Cominform was dissolved during de-Stalinization in 1956.

<sup>95</sup>*The Communist*, November 1947.

Calcutta.<sup>96</sup> This was not a sudden change. The Communist Party of India's public reactions to the action of the Indian state had gradually become more and more angry and intolerant in the previous six months.<sup>97</sup> Under Ranadive's leadership the resolutions passed at the conference and the lack of opposition mounted against them suggest that by 28 February 1948, the arguments of Zhdanov and Ranadive rang true throughout the Communist movement in India. In the eyes of Indian Communists, the world was indeed divided between democratic nations, led by the shining example of the Soviet Union, and imperialist countries, led by the collective might of Anglo-American power. More importantly, the Indian state, through its actions in Telangana, its so-called appeasement of communalism, its unsympathetic attitude to labour, and its exclusionary policies towards the Communist Party, led Communists to believe that the country was firmly in the grip of 'Anglo-American' control. It was thus deemed the time to declare war and proclaim, '*Yeh azaadi jhooti hai!*'.<sup>98</sup>

This was a call to arms. Many Communists responded by exhorting violence. According to the government, the Communist Party published pamphlets urging people to fight Congress 'dalals' (pimps), gave instructions on bomb-making, and taught the best techniques to cut telegraph wires.<sup>99</sup> However, the actual violence committed against the state was fairly sporadic, limited to Assam, Bihar, Madras, Bengal, and guerrilla warfare in the villages of Telangana.<sup>100</sup> Before many Communists got a chance to respond, the police disrupted party units throughout the country. Additionally, individual provincial governments began a systematic round-up of

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<sup>96</sup> See 'The Constitution of the Communist Party of India adopted in the Second Congress of the Communist Party of India held in Calcutta in 1948'. Basu, J. (1997). *Documents of the Communist Movement in India, Volume 5*, National Book Agency, Calcutta, pp. 724–738.

<sup>97</sup> See 'Communist Statement of Policy, For the struggle for full independence and peoples' democracy', Resolution on the present political situation passed by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of India at its meeting in Bombay, 7–16 December 1947. *Ibid.*, pp. 521–532. 'On the present policy and tasks of the Communist Party of India', January 1948. *Ibid.* p. 533.

<sup>98</sup> The Communist Party of India was not the only group to decry independence. On the same day, in a speech to the All India Sugar Factory Workers Conference at Meerut, Sarat Chandra Bose proclaimed, 'The basic fact that forces itself on our attention is that India is yet to achieve her independence.' Bose, S. K. (1968). *I Warned my Countrymen — Being the Collected Works of Sarat Chandra Bose*, Netaji Research Bureau, Calcutta.

<sup>99</sup> The Indian government issued a book describing this activity. It is useful for the prejudice and fear it contains, as well as the photographs and descriptions of communist literature and 'terror'. *Communist Violence in India*, New Delhi, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, 1949.

<sup>100</sup> See British Commonwealth Affairs — India — Weekly appreciation by UK High Commissioner, L/WS/1/1597, 1948, OIOC; British Commonwealth Affairs — India — Weekly appreciation by UK High Commissioner, 1949, L/WS/1/1598, OIOC; Communist Survey L/PJ/12/432, OIOC.

all Communists. Bengal took the lead in beginning an anti-Communist campaign in March 1948. It banned the West Bengal Communist Party, seized its press, and curtailed assemblies of more than five. Two hundred arrests were made immediately in the state. The West Bengal government acted without consulting the Centre. Nehru wrote to his sister of his surprise: ‘Three days ago West Bengal Government declared Communist Party illegal and arrested a number of prominent Communist workers. This was done curiously enough without any intimation to us and we learnt of it from newspapers next morning. Explanation was that news was in danger of leaking out and hence quick action was necessary.’<sup>101</sup> The state governments of Delhi, Madras, Bombay, Assam, and Punjab followed West Bengal’s example and raided Communist Party and trade union offices and closed down their presses.<sup>102</sup> The reaction of labour was not as easy to curtail. On 2 April 1948, 20% of the West Bengal government workforce came out on strike. The police arrested 100 strikers a day until the strike was called off.<sup>103</sup> Workers also came out to protest over these moves against the Communist Party in Bombay and Mysore, where 20,000 dockers and 20,000 miners struck in the same week.<sup>104</sup>

The government reacted by stepping up its campaign to demonize the party supported by the striking labour force — the Communists. In this atmosphere ministers continued to remind Indians, and especially Indian workers, that the Communists were an anti-democratic ‘fifth column’ acting for the interests of the Soviet Union. To the litany of charges against this opposition party they also added that the Communists were veering towards unprincipled communal and secessionist politics at the first opportunity. For example, a government publication on the history of Communism in India explicitly stated that when Gandhi died, Communists were asked to encourage Rashtra Swayam Sevak members to wreak vengeance on Congressmen and be ready to launch an armed revolution amidst the chaos.<sup>105</sup> When talks broke down between the Nizam’s regime and the Indian state, the government accused the Communists of being communal in their interests in opposing the new Indian state. Indian intelligence reported that,

The lifting of the five year ban on the Hyderabad Communist Party has led to the sug-

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<sup>101</sup>Jawaharlal Nehru to Vijayalakshmi Pandit, 31 March 1948. Gopal, *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, p. 349.

<sup>102</sup>British Commonwealth Affairs — India — Weekly appreciation by UK High Commissioner, 26 March — 2 April 1948; April 2–9 1948, L/WS/1/1597, OIOC.

<sup>103</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup>*A History of the Communist Party of India, Volume 2, 1945–1951*, Government of India, New Delhi, 1963.



gestion that the Nizam's government is attempting to gain the support of the Communists against the Government of India. Some weight is lent to this suggestion by the pamphlet published by the Communist Party which apparently criticises the Nehru government as a 'government of capitalists' and states that the object of the Congress in demanding the ascension of Hyderabad to the Indian union is to throw the State open to exploitation by Indian capitalists.<sup>106</sup>

The Madras government was also reported to be 'partly responsible for the certain situation that has arisen by their own part in toleration of communist activities in this area so long as those activities were directed against Hyderabad'.<sup>107</sup> Two deeper processes were at work here. First, the Madras and Hyderabad governments incarcerated or released Communists in order to antagonize and disrupt each other's government. Their actions had nothing to do with the Communists' own political or criminal activity. Secondly, the statement suggests that the Communists, in 'supporting' the Nizam, were practising communal politics — the bogey in 'secular' India. This attitude did not stop in Hyderabad. It resurfaced again and again. For example, the British high commissioner iterated that, 'One East Punjab minister declared that the Communists had a hand in the assassination of Gandhi and were also responsible in some measure for the bloodshed in Punjab as they had been conducting propaganda in favour of Pakistan.'<sup>108</sup> The government also blamed Communists for encouraging the politics of cessation, having supported the case for Pakistan and linked up with political activists in the northeast. For example, the chief minister of Assam warned, 'The only solid party in Manipur is the Communist Party. I have definite information that the Naga National Council is being instigated by the Communists to cut its connection with the Dominion of India.'<sup>109</sup> These accusations were to continue long after the first year of independence. For example, Communists were condemned for their activity in Kashmir. In 1949, the British high commissioner reported that,

There is reason to believe that they (Communists) are active in Kashmir, where one if not two members of the Sheikh Abdullah's government are known communists and

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<sup>106</sup>Communism in India, Weekly appreciation by UK High Commissioner, 3–9 May 1948, L/PJ/12/772, OIOC.

<sup>107</sup>Communism in India, Weekly appreciation by UK High Commissioner, 10–16 May 1948, L/PJ/12/772, OIOC.

<sup>108</sup>Communism in India, Weekly appreciation by UK High Commissioner, 12 April 1948, L/PJ/12/772, OIOC.

<sup>109</sup>Gopinath Bordoloi, Chief Minister Assam to Sardar Vallabhai Patel, 26 May 1948. Das, Sardar Patel's Correspondence, p. 122.

Sheikh Abdullah himself if not actually a fellow traveller tends to the extreme left in his views. The Kashmir militia is organised on communist lines and is communist controlled.<sup>110</sup>

In the same year secret surveillance reports claimed that the Muslim National Guards in Old Delhi were 'gradually coming under the influence of the Communists'.<sup>111</sup>

Such ostracization of the Communists draws parallels with the ways in which the colonial state had on occasion used the Communists to frighten Indians into steadfast loyalty to the Raj.<sup>112</sup> Congress ministers, adept in mimicking colonial policy and thought, were playing the same game. They had pushed the Communists to the periphery of politics in the new state and were attempting to burden them with the blame for all opposition and grievances against the regime, despite its disparate and varied nature.

## Conclusion

By 1948 the government had succeeded in marginalizing the Communist Party of India. It was too weak to lead revolutionary action against the state but, thanks to its zealous activists and government exaggeration, it had a public image that far outweighed its numerical strength. It was thus not shocking nor considered undemocratic to declare all-out war on the Communists. In April 1948 Mr Gadgil, the Dominion minister of works, mines, and power, warned Communists and Socialists 'that if they acted in any way detrimental to the well being of the country, the government of India would not merely indulge in expressions of moral platitudes but would liquidate those who were out to create disorder'.<sup>113</sup> Such language had enduring effects. For example, a year later, when addressing the Madras Chamber of Commerce, Sardar Patel explained to an audience of Congressmen that, 'Communism was a monster that is raising its head. It will leave nothing for you, neither

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<sup>110</sup>Communism in India, Weekly appreciation by UK High Commissioner, 23 February 1949, L/PJ/12/772, OIOC.

<sup>111</sup>Intelligence Bureau Report, 11 July 1949 in Delhi Police (V Inst) F. No. 61, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML).

<sup>112</sup>Sharma, S. (2010). *Radical Politics in Late-Colonial Punjab: Sedition and Governance*, Routledge, London, p. 25.

<sup>113</sup>Communism in India, Weekly appreciation by UK High Commissioner, 12 April 1948, L/PJ/12/772, OIOC.

culture nor freedom if it is not checked.’<sup>114</sup> He also issued a chilly warning to an audience in Hyderabad that, ‘I shall not allow one Communist to remain alive because it will poison not only the State but the whole of India.’<sup>115</sup> By now Nehru was singing from the same hymn sheet. At a public meeting in Orissa in early 1949, he raged against the Communists who were, in his eyes, deliberately wrecking trains to bring about mass starvation and terror and dislodge India’s national life. He asked the question, ‘Can anybody believe that those who were capable of such atrocities and who owed allegiance to a centre outside the country do any good to the people of this country?’<sup>116</sup>

Nehru’s words might be seen as bluff and bluster against political opposition in an era when general elections based on universal suffrage were about to be held. And the Communists themselves were no less accusatory or hostile in their charges against the Congress leaders of the new independent state. However, in this conflict the government had the power of the state, the legislation, and the majority of the press on its side. The opinions of ministers were far more powerful than those of the outlawed left, especially because its extreme elements were alienating its own constituents, the labouring poor. Thus, before his death on 15 December 1950, Sardar Patel was able to push through the Preventive Detention Bill. He described it as the minimum evil necessary to safeguard democratic institutions in India from the communist ‘menace’. As he said,

Our fight is not with Communism or with those who believe in the theory of Communism but with those whose avowed object is to create disruption, dislocation, tampering with communications, suborn loyalty of the people and make it impossible for normal Government to function. Obviously we cannot deal with them under the provisions of ordinary law.<sup>117</sup>

It is not remarkable that Patel singled out the Communists when introducing the Bill. Of all the enemies of the Indian nation, Communist methods and ideology represented the worst of them to Patel and his cohorts. Communist cadres, less than 10,000 strong in 1947, could not hold out against the war unleashed against them. They had borne the brunt of government hostility because they had shown

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<sup>114</sup>British Commonwealth Affairs — India — Weekly appreciation by UK High Commissioner, February 1949, L/WS/1/1598, OIOC.

<sup>115</sup>British Commonwealth Affairs — India — Weekly appreciation by UK High Commissioner, 24 February — 4 March 1949, L/WS/1/1598, OIOC.

<sup>116</sup>British Commonwealth Affairs — India — Weekly appreciation by UK High Commissioner, 10–17 March 1949, L/WS/1/1598, OIOC.

<sup>117</sup>*Communism Betrayed in India*, Tagore Memorial Publication, 1950, p. 59.

that they held sway over so much of the Indian workforce. In 1951, their numbers were depleted and their hold over unions attenuated, they returned to electoral politics, cap in hand, to play the role of opposition to Congress, as the Socialists had opted to do three years before.<sup>118</sup> Communist Party candidates stood for election throughout India. They campaigned for their Party, roused the crowds at hustings, and jostled for the Indian electorate's vote. They had learned that the only way to do politics in the new state was the Congress way. By virtue of being the largest nationalist movement, Congress had the mandate of the people and had laid down the parameters of acceptable politics.

Congress leaders did not become constitutional statesmen overnight on 15 August 1947. Neither did their counterparts in the Congress Socialist Party and the Communist Party of India. However, in Sardar Patel and Jawaharlal Nehru, Congress had leaders who had become astute about electoral politics far sooner than their counterparts. They continued to direct who could and who could not represent the nationalist movement at the electoral polls, just as they had in previous elections in the Raj. This movement began before independence had been won: from 1945 against the Communists and 1947 against the Socialists. This paper has illustrated that Congress leaders invested time and thought into how to remove groups who represented the interests of the 'working class' from the Indian National Congress. This process was not simply directed from above by the puppeteer Patel. This paper has shown how the process played out in other parts of India. In Bombay, local Congress conflicts with the increasingly popular Socialists gave the national Congress leaders the excuse to push Socialists out of their organization. Similarly, the government of Bengal was the first to implement action against Communists, propelling the rest of the country to follow suit. The reason behind these actions is not the issue here. The Congress, as a political party, could justifiably bar its members who chose to stand against it in elections. Similarly, a newly entrenched state had to deal with the incendiary action of the Communist Party after it declared war in 22 February 1948. What is more significant is that Congress actions and the Congress-led Indian state drove away the same parties who had fought with them and for them in the years before independence. The process by which Congress — both Nehru's soft Congress and Patel's right — alienated its former allies on the left is crucial when looking at the construction of the categories of government and opposition in independent India. By focusing on the 12 months around independence, it becomes clearer what was to become acceptable and unacceptable in the discourse of the new Indian polity.

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<sup>118</sup> Communist Party of India membership fell from 89,000 to 10,000 during this period. Rajimwale, A. (2005). *Glimpses of History through Party Congresses*, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, p. 48.

Under Congress, during this decisive and neglected period, the state developed a democracy that rested on coercion as much as consent.